

Quick Facts

About...*Ringworm*

What is ringworm?

Ringworm is not a worm, and it is not caused by a worm. Ringworm is a fungal infection (tinea) of the skin that can appear on any area of the body, e.g., the scalp, groin area (sometimes referred to as jock itch), or the feet (sometimes referred to as athlete's foot). While ringworm is generally not serious except in persons with weakened immune systems, it can cause considerable discomfort.

How is ringworm spread?

Ringworm can be passed from person to person by direct skin-to-skin contact or by coming into contact with contaminated items, e.g., combs, unwashed clothing, bedding, and shower or swimming pool surfaces. A variety of animals, including dogs and cats (especially puppies and kittens), cows, goats, pigs, and horses, can also pass ringworm to humans.

Who is at risk for ringworm?

The fungus that causes ringworm prefers damp, close environments. Warm, humid settings that promote heavy sweating aid in spreading ringworm, so athletes are at increased risk. Ringworm is common in young children, and outbreaks can occur in schools, child-care settings, and nurseries. Children with pets are also at increased risk.

How do I know if I have ringworm?

Ringworm presents itself in slightly different ways depending on the body area that is affected:

- Scalp (tinea capitis) – Ringworm on the scalp appears as an itchy, bald patch of scaly skin. This form of ringworm is most common in children.
- Groin (tinea cruris) – Symptoms include itching or burning in the groin, thigh, or anal area. The skin in these areas is red and often flakes, peels, or cracks.
- Feet (tinea pedis) – Itching, burning, redness, and stinging between the toes and sometimes on the foot itself are typical symptoms.
- Body (tinea corporis) – Ringworm on other areas of the body usually appears as a ring shape that is reddish and causes intense itching. The skin inside the ring may appear healthy. The rash can be either dry and scaly or wet and crusty. Often there can be several patches of ringworm on the skin at one time.

How can ringworm be treated?

When used as directed, over-the-counter antifungal medications (creams and sprays) can effectively treat mild cases of ringworm. In more severe cases or cases that do not improve within 2-4 weeks with over-the-counter medications, you should consult a health care provider who may prescribe medication. Prescription medications to treat ringworm may be either topical or oral.

How is ringworm prevented?

Because it is common and contagious before symptoms appear, ringworm is difficult to prevent. However, you can reduce your risk of contracting ringworm by adhering to the following guidelines:

- Practice good personal hygiene – wash hands thoroughly and often, especially after contact with animals.
- Keep common or shared areas clean, especially in schools, child-care centers, gyms, and locker rooms.
- Avoid walking barefoot in public places. Wear waterproof shoes or “flip-flops” in public showers and swimming areas.
- Keep all clothing, including bedclothes, clean.
- Stay cool and dry – avoid wearing thick clothing (e.g., socks) for long periods of time in warm, humid weather. If possible, change clothing that becomes sweaty or wet.
- Check your pets for areas of hair loss; consult your veterinarian. Avoid contact with infected animals.
- Avoid sharing personal items, e.g., clothing, towels, hairbrushes, etc. Never borrow other people’s shoes.

For additional information on ringworm, please visit the National Institutes of Health Web site at:

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/001439.htm>

or the Kid’s Health Web site at:

<http://www.kidshealth.org/parent/infections/fungal/ringworm.html>

This page was last reviewed October 14, 2008.



Indiana State
Department of Health